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ABSTRACT

The orientation program of the Georgia Center for Continuing Education at The University of Georgia for nontraditional students has two primary goals. The first goal is to provide information that will help students make a successful transition to college; second, to provide opportunities for students to meet each other and campus personnel in an environment which fosters a sense of community and belonging. This is very important for nontraditional students, many of whom are apprehensive about beginning or returning to college. The orientation program, which lasts about 2 hours, includes a reception, welcome and introductions, student/faculty panel, campus orientation, University Evening Class orientation, student services needs assessment, and program evaluation. The "Keys for Success" for this program fall into three categories: (1) preparation, including: clearly defined goals, familiarity with student characteristics and needs, familiarity with campus and community resources, and planning, organization, and rehearsal; (2) program design and implementation, including: convenient date and time, welcoming atmosphere, opportunities for informal dialogue, a program component guaranteed to be a success, pertinent information, variety of methods to disseminate information, flexibility, appropriate program length, and carefully selected program presenters; and (3) program evaluation, including: formal and informal evaluation and post-program planning. (ABL)

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Susan G. Conover

ORIENTATION FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS: A STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC):"

A PROGRAM PRESENTED AT THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN COLLEGE
PERSONNEL ASSOCIATION, ATLANTA, GEORGIA, MARCH 18, 1991

Dr. Susan Conover, Student Services Coordinator; Ms. Faye Chatman,
Coordinator of Admissions and Academic Advisement; Dr. Marilyn
Smith, English Instructor; and Ms. Brenda Burton, Mr. Ira Edwards,
and Ms. Liz Lewis, students. University Evening Classes, The
University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

This program describes the format, structure, and innovative
features of an orientation program for nontraditional students
enrolled in The University of Georgia Evening Classes program. An
overview of the orientation program is provided. The
student/faculty panel, which has proven to be the highlight of the
orientation program, is simulated. "Keys for Success" for
nontraditional student orientation programs are presented. The
program concludes with a discussion and the exchange of orientation
materials.

INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that, as early as the mid-1990's and no later than
the year 2000, nontraditional students will comprise at least 60%
of the national college population (Wegner, 1990). Nontraditional
students have been defined in many ways, including adult, part-
time, intermittent, "older," disadvantaged, Hispanic, women, and
black learners (Arfken, 1981; Wegner, 1990).

As a result, there is a concomitant need to provide special
orientation programs for nontraditional students (Burke, 1987;
Uncampher et al, 1983). In fact, orientation programs have been
identified as one of the most important factors in enhancing
students' desire and commitment to return to postsecondary
education (Adams, 1986). Orientation programs for nontraditional
students range from community-oriented back-to-school programs
(Haponski, 1983) to credit courses (Heretick and Doyle, 1983).

Our program today is designed to acquaint you with the orientation
program for nontraditional students that is offered by University
Evening Classes, a department of the Division of Academic Credit
of the Georgia Center for Continuing Education at The University
of Georgia.

In 1953, 17 veterans of World War II and the Korean War attended
the first evening class offered by the Georgia Center on the
University campus. Since then, University Evening Classes and the
Georgia Center have continued to develop academic programs. The

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realities of an increasingly complex society have mandated that more educational opportunities be made available for adult and part-time students who desire to continue their education for a variety of reasons.

In keeping with national trends, the number and nature of nontraditional students admitted to University Evening Classes have dramatically changed. Each term, approximately 1000 students from a variety of backgrounds enroll in undergraduate credit courses offered during evening hours and on Saturday mornings. University Evening Classes also provides a number of academic support services, including individual pre-admissions counseling, academic advising, English and math reviews and labs, career counseling, evening office hours, and workshops on topics such as study skills and time management. While very much a part of The University of Georgia's large and vital campus, Evening Classes maintains the atmosphere of a small college where students receive individual attention from a staff and faculty experienced in working with adult and part-time students.

Our orientation program reflects University Evening Classes' commitment to providing quality services for nontraditional students. We would like to begin our program today by giving you an overview of our orientation program. Part of the program, the student/faculty panel, will be simulated. The panel consistently has proven to be the highlight of the program. We will then discuss what we call "Keys for Success," or those ingredients which we have found to be essential for our program to be both useful and well-received. After that, we'd like to open the floor for discussion; we're especially interested in your sharing what you're doing on your own campuses.

OVERVIEW OF ORIENTATION PROGRAM

Our orientation program for nontraditional students has two primary goals: first, to provide information that will help students make a successful transition to college; and second, to provide opportunities for students to meet each other and campus personnel in an environment which fosters a sense of community and belonging. This is very important for nontraditional students, many of whom are apprehensive about beginning or returning to college.

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Our program, which lasts about two hours, is structured as follows:

NEW STUDENT ORIENTATION PROGRAM

6:45 p.m.	Reception
7:00	Welcome and introductions
7:10	Student/faculty panel
7:40	Break
7:55	Campus orientation
8:15	University Evening Classes orientation
8:40	Student services needs assessment
8:50	Program evaluation
9:00	Adjournment

We want to walk you through our current New Student Orientation program, but first we want to give you some background by telling you about our department's past orientation programs.

As recently as the mid-1980's, University Evening Classes did not have in place a program designed specifically to aid new students in making the transition to the college classroom. The one program the department had was a thirty-minute program entitled "Introduction to Registration Procedures," which our advisors conducted twice a quarter: the first was held immediately prior to pre-registration, and the second occurred immediately prior to the registration session held a day or two before classes start. The purpose of this program (which we still conduct, by the way) was--and still is--twofold: (1) to acquaint new students with the registration process; (2) to introduce them to Evening Classes services, policies, and procedures. A videotape walks the new students through the registration process step by step. The Coordinator of Admissions and Advisement and the Student Services Coordinator talk about the free academic support services that University Evening Classes offers its students, the course withdrawal procedure, and academic advisement. As you can see, this thirty-minute Introduction to Registration Procedures program held just before new students register for classes cannot possibly provide them with the range of information or the supportive environment they need if their questions and their doubts are to be addressed.

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In the Fall of 1986, University Evening Classes took its first step toward putting in place a program intended to serve the purpose of introducing new students to the University of Georgia campus and to the Evening Classes program. One evening during the week before Fall Quarter classes started, new students attended an orientation program. Refreshments were served; representatives from several campus offices such as the Counseling and Testing Center and the Office of Financial Aid were on hand to talk with new students and to give them literature regarding the services offered by their respective offices. University Evening Classes staff familiarized students with University Evening Classes--its programs, staff, services, policies, and procedures--and with the University campus and its resources.

An orientation with this specific format has not been repeated; representatives from other offices on campus have not participated in our later orientation programs. The reason is not that the representatives did a poor job at our orientation or that their offices do not provide important services. So what is the reason? We have found that our new students want New Student Orientation to address their immediate concerns and questions, and their immediate concerns focus on the academic experience: the college classroom, their fellow students, their instructors. They are worried about what their instructors will expect of them; about whether they "measure up" to the other--younger--students; about whether they can juggle their multiple life roles of parent, spouse, full-time or part-time worker, and student. They are more concerned about whether they should have their textbooks with them on the first night of class than they are about whether the Counseling and Testing Center offers the departmental placement tests in English and mathematics.

The fact that the concerns of our new students focus so sharply on academic skills and expectations is not surprising when you consider that most of our new students are adults who have been out of the academic classroom for five, ten, or even twenty years. In addition, they are rarely on campus, except to attend class. And when they are not in class, their time is taken up by many responsibilities and roles. I do want to emphasize, however, that once they have gotten into the classroom and decided they belong there and want to stay there, they almost always--at some point in the collegiate career--seek out and make use of the many resources the University makes available to them through such offices as the Counseling and Testing Center and the University Health Service. These students also rely on their academic advisors to provide them with information about appropriate resources available on campus or in the community.

In the Fall of 1988, the New Student Orientation program was redesigned to meet a specific goal: to empower students so that they can and will take control of their college experience. We

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continued to familiarize new students with the University Evening Classes program and with the University, but we added a few new features as well: (1) we discussed study skills; (2) we gave them a view of the college classroom from the perspective of an adult student and of a faculty member; (3) we talked about the special needs of adult students and how those can be and are being met; (4) we closed with a discussion of two big questions--What is a college education? What is the value of a college education?

In the Winter of 1990, New Student Orientation underwent further modification as the result of the "dreaming and scheming" and planning of Dr. Susan Conover, who had joined the Evening Classes staff the preceding fall. Dr. Conover developed a less formal program because she wanted to create a supportive, open environment which would invite--even encourage--interaction, the exchange of ideas, feelings, and information, and thus address the immediate concerns and questions of the new students. If you look at the agenda for our New Student Orientation, you will see that it opens with a reception; light refreshments are served. University Evening Classes staff have the chance to greet and chat with the new students individually and to introduce the new students to one another. We seek to make them feel welcome and comfortable.

The formal welcome and introductions are followed by what has truly come to be the highlight of New Student Orientation--"Advice from the Experts." A panel of three Evening Classes students offers suggestions for surviving and enjoying one's first quarter in college. The new students have the chance to hear from someone who was in their shoes not so long ago, someone like them, someone who has made it! Then an Evening Classes instructor speaks about what he or she expects of students, what he or she expects of himself or herself, and what students should expect of their instructors.

What we have witnessed during this part of the orientation program is exactly what we had hoped for: a dialogue begins. Everyone takes part. New students ask questions of the "the experts" on the panel; "the experts" follow up on one another's comments; advisors throw in advice based on their experience working with students; the faculty member may use a follow-up question to draw further information from a student panelist. In fact, much of the material that would be formally covered later under Campus Orientation and Evening Classes Orientation is brought to light and discussed during the student/faculty panel portion of the program.

At the end, the new students are asked to complete a student services needs assessment and an evaluation of the orientation program. The student services needs assessment helps our staff to put in place the services our students want and need at times convenient for them. The evaluations have, not surprisingly, revealed that the portion of New Student Orientation that the new students found most helpful and worthwhile were the words of wisdom

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and encouragement and the practical advice from "the experts"--the student panel and the University Evening Classes instructor.

Student/faculty panel simulation

My name is Brenda Burton. I'm married and I have a 19 year-old son who's a college freshman. I work full-time with a telephone company as a collection representative. I started attending University Evening Classes in 1986 to pursue a degree in business administration. University Evening Classes has allowed me to be able to raise a family, work full-time, and attend school. It has been a challenge but a rewarding one.

I've had to discipline myself and learn to prioritize and organize my daily activities. If you have to juggle family, career, and school, you'll find that organization is very important.

Upon just entering University Evening Classes, I was very apprehensive because I'd been out of school for a long time and was older than most of the students in my class. But the instructors were sensitive to my situation and made the transition easy.

I would recommend to anyone that's considering University Evening Classes to communicate with your instructors and to take advantage of the advisors. Advisors are available during class hours and can help you with most problems you may encounter.

Without University Evening Classes I would not be able to further my education and accomplish the goals I have set for myself. Hopefully, one day soon you'll be able to obtain a degree in the University Evening Classes program.

My name is Ira Edwards, Jr. I'm so grateful for the University Evening Classes program because it has given me the opportunity to finish my degree in criminal justice. Being a father of three and working full-time, it was impossible for me to go to school during the day because of my job. However, Evening Classes was the key that unlocked the door so I could continue my education.

I am also grateful for the faculty and staff of Evening Classes. They are very down-to-earth people and really care about your well-being as an individual.

I want to thank University Evening Classes for making it possible for me to obtain one of my main objectives in life: to get my degree.

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My name is Liz Lewis. I have worked for several financial institutions over the past twelve years and found that once I reached a certain level of management I was unable to be promoted further because I did not have a college degree. The University of Georgia Evening Classes program allowed me to begin my education and still work full-time.

Last January I quit my job in order to attend school full-time. This was necessary in order for me to complete my degree. And I am pleased to say that I will be graduating in the winter of 1993.

The University Evening Classes counselors are wonderful. I had been out of high school for fifteen years and was scared to death to start school. The counselors assured me that I would not be the only non-traditional- aged student in the class and that I would probably do better in class than most of the younger students. I began by taking math classes because I dreaded them the most. That was a mistake. I should have begun with an easier subject like English in order to boost my confidence.

I found that I had to learn to study all over again. I also found that if I purchased my books early and read the first chapter before classes started that I was always ahead of the game. Some instructors just take attendance the first night of class, but most lecture for two hours. If you're not prepared the first night, you can quickly become frustrated and find yourself behind.

Initially, my main goal was to obtain a degree in business administration. Once I was truly committed to school, I found that my goals began to change. I enjoyed interacting with the instructors and found that my interest turned to education. I have discovered that learning is an ongoing process and that I must continue to learn in order to be a valuable employee and citizen. College has made me appreciate many things that I once took for granted and has helped me to understand that it takes all types of people to make the world go around. Last year I changed my goal and transferred to the College of Education. My plans are to continue my career in the financial world and to teach evening classes at the high school or junior college level.

The advice I would give to a non-traditional student who is contemplating going back to school is this: Just do it! Once you have finished your first class, you'll wonder why you didn't do it years ago.

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My name is Dr. Marilynn Smith, an English instructor for University Evening Classes.

My favorite anecdote on student success comes from a conversation I had with one of my students a few years ago. He was in his late 20s, nearing graduation, and had been a decent, improving student in both of the world literature courses I teach. He was full of the pride and satisfaction that come from working long to meet a difficult goal. He told me that his first experience with college was a great deal of fun but unsuccessful. He had gone to another college directly from high school and had immediately adapted to campus life, perhaps a bit too well. When he decided to have another crack at college, he said he decided to see what attending classes would do. Much to his pleasure, he passed the course. So, he said he started to read his assignments, and he saw even more grade improvements. Then, he related with proud insight, he actually started studying.

While this young man's secret to success may sound ridiculously simple, we who teach expect students to be present in the classroom. Yes, we expect you to be a student. We expect at minimum excellent attendance, class preparation, and reasonable attention to work handed in. The problem is, most people enrolled in an evening classes program are obliged to also keep a very busy day-time schedule. They must also meet employment and family obligations. Even full-time evening students without day jobs find student time syphoned off to follow the Braves or to console a desperately ill friend or relative. So, what should you do if your boss wants you to work overtime every once in a while, or your father has a heart attack, or your baby sitter doesn't show up? What if you get sick? You should probably first ask yourself why you are taking classes at all. If you are frustratingly serious about being a student, then it behooves you to communicate your problems to your professor. We aren't talking confessional or psychoanalysis here, just a simple explanation and a desire to get back up to speed. A word of caution here, though: teachers aren't necessarily compassionate all the time. It would be unusual, but if your problems can't be resolved, you may need to weigh your options and have a chat with an Evening Classes advisor.

While I'm talking about the real world, I might as well address another frustrating part of student life in the liberal arts. I am a comparatist by training and only by avocation. My other life is as a librarian by training and by happy default. I often hear "Why do I have to take literature or philosophy or calculus or history? I'm going to be a computer expert and I don't need those courses." Let's face it--literature isn't "practical." Part of the answer is cold: course requirements leading to a degree are calculatedly and politically determined by committee and by administration, and if you want a degree, you will take how ever

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many lab classes and artsy classes "they" say you need. There are faster technical degrees you can get elsewhere if you only want to learn certain job skills. However, we who believe in the virtues of a liberal arts education can only offer you the possibility of winning big bucks on Jeopardy, impressing your partner in a Trivial Pursuit game, and the opportunity to ponder issues that have intrigued great thinkers for centuries. The warm answer is that there's no telling when you might be glad you've experienced something impractical but which in some way enriches and improves your soul. Besides, on the practical side, all the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic that you will need to be successful on the job are improved in these liberal arts courses.

I've outlined the bare expectations we have of students. What do we love? We love students with opinions, questions, and interest. We love students who show they not only read the assignments but have thought about them.

On the other hand, what do I think is fair for students to expect from their professors? I wish I could say that we're all the most intelligent, entertaining, inspiring creatures in the world. Few professors can fit all three categories equally well. Teaching is part performance, part personality, part preparation. Abe Lincoln said something about pleasing some of the people, and I think it is too much to expect to be constantly transported in an intellectual rush. Especially not in the introductory-level courses it is fair to expect too much heady inspiration. But, I do think it is fair for you to expect to know what is expected of you and what goals are to be met in the course. You should find preparation and enthusiasm. You should also find fairness and objectivity. With luck and determination, you might discover the magic of that subject that intrigued your professor. In any case, I wish you all success in your future studies at UGA. If you see me in the hall, let me know how you're doing.

(Discussion follows).

KEYS FOR SUCCESS

We have been providing this orientation program every academic term for the past two years. Many of our original program ideas have remained intact; but, by using student evaluations, and by learning through trial and error, we have continually refined our program. We've found that a successful orientation program for nontraditional students is the result of research, careful planning, openness to change, and, to some extent, luck. The following "Keys for Success" fall into three categories: preparation, program design and implementation, and program evaluation.

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Preparation

1. **Clearly defined program goals and objectives.** Program planners must have a clear idea of what they want their program to accomplish. Goals and objectives must be designed to reflect the institution's mission and to meet the needs of nontraditional students who will attend the orientation program.
2. **Familiarity with the characteristics and needs of the institution's nontraditional students.** Data regarding variables such as sex, age, race, educational background, and commuting distance to campus can be obtained through appropriate institutional departments such as planning and research or admissions. Information and insights gained from everyday contact with students, such as students' motivations, goals, personal backgrounds, anxieties, and hobbies, are equally valuable. All of this information enables program planners to include pertinent information and to use meaningful examples during the orientation program.
3. **Familiarity with campus and community resources, especially those which are useful to nontraditional students.** Nontraditional students typically lead very busy lives; most work and/or have families. Consequently, their interest in campus and community resources may be very different from that of traditional students. For example, nontraditional students may be interested in tutoring programs, career counseling services, and child care facilities that are available during evening hours. Orientation programs for nontraditional students should include information about campus and community resources that are both relevant and accessible to them.
4. **Planning, organization, and rehearsal.** A successful orientation program for nontraditional students must be planned well in advance of the program date. The program itself and the people involved in delivering the program must be organized. We believe in at least one "dress rehearsal" of the orientation program, where program presenters have the opportunity to practice their respective portions of the program and to receive feedback from other presenters. We believe that students should be involved in every phase of the planning process.

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Program Design and Implementation

1. **Convenient date and time.** Because nontraditional students' schedules are complex and varied, there is no such thing as a "perfect" time for an orientation program. Through trial and error, it is possible to schedule the orientation program at a time when most students can attend. It is important to provide students who are unable to attend the program with alternative ways of receiving the information and assistance they need, such as through individual appointments with academic advisors or videotapes.
2. **Welcoming atmosphere.** This should be evident from the minute new students walk in the door of the building where the orientation program is being held. If possible, it's a good idea to have students, faculty or staff on hand at building entrances to greet and direct new students. Directional signs to the orientation room should be clearly visible. Students entering the program site should be warmly greeted and directed. Furniture should be set up in an informal way, such as in a circle rather than in conventional classroom rows, so as to promote discussion and interaction.
3. **Opportunities for informal dialogue.** Because nontraditional students typically spend limited amounts of time on campus, their opportunities to meet other nontraditional students may likewise be limited. Thus it is important to provide new nontraditional students with opportunities to meet informally. For example, we schedule a reception with refreshments prior to our orientation program. At the beginning of the program, we ask students to introduce themselves and to share information about their backgrounds. We also schedule a break midway through the program. These opportunities allow students to get to know each other and to establish a network with other students with whom they have things in common.
4. **Program "highlight."** It is desirable for new student orientation programs to have at least one component that is guaranteed to be a success and to capture the attention of participants. Our student/faculty panel has proven to be the "centerpiece" of our orientation program. In fact, it is consistently the most highly rated portion of our program. We think this is due to the characteristics of the panelists and the fact that the panelists are rightfully viewed as the real experts on nontraditional student education.

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5. **Pertinent information.** Because most orientation programs are held for a limited amount of time, it is impossible to cover every topic that may be of interest to nontraditional students. Thus it is crucial to include only that information which will help nontraditional students make a successful transition to college and know what to do when they have questions or problems.
6. **Variety of methods to disseminate information.** Just as it is desirable for an academic instructor to use a variety of pedagogical methods, an orientation program that includes several different formats for disseminating information is more likely to be well-received. Examples of program formats include lecture, discussion, questionnaires or "quizzes," and the use of audio-visual equipment such as overhead projectors and videos.
7. **Flexibility.** While it is essential to have nontraditional student orientation programs well-planned, it is equally important for program planners to have open minds and flexible attitudes in the event that unforeseen circumstances prior to or during the program necessitate changes. One of our orientation programs consisted almost solely of spontaneous discussion generated by the student/faculty panel, which we schedule at the beginning of our program. In the course of the discussion, virtually all of the topics which we had planned to cover in other formats were discussed.
8. **Appropriate program length.** Nontraditional students typically lead very busy lives since most work, have families, and/or are involved in community or other groups. Most students find it difficult to give up large amounts of time for orientation programs. Programs should be designed for the minimum amount of time that it takes to cover pertinent information. Our program lasts approximately two hours.
9. **Carefully selected program presenters.** Everyone involved in nontraditional student orientation programs must be familiar with and sincerely committed to non-traditional student education. In addition, presenters must be advocates for their institution's mission, programs, and services. If the student/faculty panel is used, student panelists from a variety of backgrounds should be selected on the basis of their academic performance (though they do not necessarily have to be "top" students), speaking ability, and insight into issues affecting nontraditional student education.

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In short, student panelists must be able to serve as positive role models and have proven leadership skills. Student panelists should be prepared to discuss their backgrounds, goals, motivations, and experiences as nontraditional students. Faculty panelists must have a demonstrated understanding of and sensitivity to the unique needs of nontraditional students, public speaking ability, and successful classroom experience with nontraditional students (formal and informal instructor evaluations are one gauge of this success).

Program Evaluation

1. **Formal program evaluation.** At the end of the orientation program, new student participants should be asked to complete evaluations of the program. Items should include "forced choice" assessments of each program component as well as open-ended questions. Students also should have the opportunity to make comments. In order to encourage students to give honest and constructive feedback, the evaluations should be anonymous. It is also desirable for students to specify information that they need but did not receive during the orientation program. Program planners should be prepared to follow-up with students who indicate they need additional assistance.
2. **Informal program evaluation.** This can be accomplished through conversations with new students who attended the orientation program, for example during advising appointments or at social gatherings.
3. **Post-program planning.** Soon after the orientation program is held, program participants should meet to discuss their views of the program as well as the results of formal and informal program evaluations. This affords program planners the opportunity to discuss the program while it is fresh in their minds and to make preliminary plans for the next orientation program.

DISCUSSION

At this time, we welcome any questions or comments you have about our orientation program. We also invite you to share what you are doing on your own campuses in nontraditional student orientation.

PROGRAM EVALUATION AND ADJOURNMENT

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